

DECEMBER 25, 2013: CHRISTMAS
(Eucharist During the Day) Isaiah 52:7-10
Hebrews 1:1-6 John 1:1-18

One of the most difficult things for Christians to do on this day is to keep focused on the basics of our faith.

We concentrate so much on Jesus' birth that we forget both that the gospel infancy narratives were the last part of those writings to take shape and that Christmas itself wasn't celebrated for centuries after the initial event. Obviously our ancestors in the faith didn't think Jesus' actual birth was as significant as we do.

In his now-classic book *Speaking Christian*, Scripture scholar Marcus Borg bemoans the fact that most Christians have drastically reduced the biblical idea of salvation to simply avoiding hell and getting into heaven. He correctly points out that the vast majority of authors of our Hebrew Scriptures knew nothing of an afterlife as we know it. (The insight that one could live forever after death didn't even permeate Judaism until about 100 years before Jesus' birth.) And even in the Christian Scriptures, getting into heaven doesn't seem to be the major reason people became Jesus' followers. The main thrust of biblical salvation almost always concerns what's happening right here and now and how our lives are changed by God entering into those lives.

In today's Deutero-Isaiah reading, for instance, the "good news" Yahweh's messenger is bringing to the people in exile has nothing to do with what's going to take place after their physical deaths. The "salvation" he announces revolves around their eventual return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the holy city in a peaceful environment.

But just as a huge percentage of Deutero-Isaiah's audience never seemed to notice the salvation taking place around them, so both the author of Hebrews and John the evangelist also must deal with people who don't see the impact the risen Jesus can have on their daily lives.

For John, Jesus is the "true light which enlightens everyone." He comes into our darkened world bringing life to those who believe in him - who commit themselves to imitating his dying and rising. Not only do we believe he's the child of God, we're convinced that he also empowers all his imitators to become God's children. Best of all, the risen Jesus - this word of God - is the image of God among us.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews agrees, although he approaches Jesus' impact on our lives from a little bit different direction. He agrees Jesus is God's word, but not the only word. "In times past," he writes, "God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son." Jesus simply is just the last stage in God's ongoing communication with us. God's been speaking to us for a long time. But the writer seems to be convinced that if we haven't heard and followed God's word in the past, neither will we recognize Jesus as God's word today.

That might not be the message many of us look forward to hearing on Christmas. We'd rather just zero in on how nice it is that this little new-born Bethlehem baby is God, that he unselfishly surrendered his divine pre-existence to come down on earth and show us how to get into heaven. We conveniently forget the daily implications of Jesus' presence among us. God's word no longer comes to us from a distance; it's constantly among us, a part of all which God, through Jesus, created, as close to us as the air we breathe or the risen Jesus who now permeates everything and everyone we encounter.

Of course, it's also our responsibility to surface and follow that word on December 26th.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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DECEMBER 29, 2013: HOLY FAMILY Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14

Colossians 3:12-21 Matthew 2:13-15,19-23

Perhaps Linus van Pelt's best-known quote is, "I love mankind; its people I can't stand." By actually saying it out loud, the famous Peanuts cartoon character hit a resonant cord in all of us. It's easy for us to generically love the human race; but at times it's hard as blazes for us to love specific human beings. That's one of the reasons today's Feast of the Holy Family is so important.

Our sacred authors are always realistic. Though they often speak in lofty terms about loving God and our neighbor, they just as often get down to the nitty-gritty of that love. They expect us to be just as loving toward family members as we are toward total strangers.

Today's Sirach author, for instance, talks not only about generically honoring one's father, he also gives some down to earth advice about a specific situation in which such honor is to be shown: dementia. "My son," he writes, "take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not as long as he lives. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten" What you could demand of others, you don't demand from your parents. That means you answer your forgetful mother with the same loving gentleness after she asks for the fifteenth time, "Where are we going?" as you answered her the first time she asked.

The Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Colossians follows the same pattern. He initially talks in broad terms about developing "heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience," but then he quickly gets down to specifics such as, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, so that they may not become discouraged."

Of course when someone gets specific about loving others, one must deal with the limits our age and culture put on that love. I don't know that many loving wives in the world we inhabit today would respond favorably to the author's command, "Be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord." (It's good to note that in the verse immediately following our liturgical passage the same author tells slaves in the Colossian community to "obey" their masters in all things.)

There's obviously no one way to show love that applies to all people in all situations all the time. Being committed to others demands that we constantly "hang loose;" always open to doing things for them today that we hadn't even noticed yesterday. As we hear in today's gospel pericope, Joseph and Mary had to always be flexible in the way they loved their son.

Though scholars (and the editors of National Geographic) doubt the historicity of Herod's slaughter of the "innocents," the lesson Matthew is trying to convey in this passage can't be overlooked. Parenthood demands constant adaptation. People aren't raising children today the way my parents raised me.

The evangelist points out that Joseph immediately dropped everything, closed his carpentry shop, shuttered their Bethlehem home, and, with no GPS, set out for a foreign country. Can't image the adaptation which this drastic, life-changing move demanded. Things would never be the same again.

Yet all of us know parents who made parallel moves when one of their children contracted a life-threatening disease, or was seriously injured in an accident. None counted the costs or worried about the inconvenience. Love gives us responsibilities that we never had before we loved.

Thank goodness, the historical Jesus was loved by his family. Gives us a terrific example to follow.

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